

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Melvin J. Holley

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Holley, Melvin J., 1933-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Melvin J. Holley,
<b>Dates:</b>	February 29, 2008 and October 23, 2012
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2008 and 2012
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:27:07).
<b>Abstract:</b>	City transit worker and genealogist Melvin J. Holley (1933 - ) served as president of the Lansing Area African American Genealogical Society. Holley was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 29, 2008 and October 23, 2012, in Detroit, Michigan and Lansing, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2008_038
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Genealogist Melvin J. Holley was born on January 27, 1933 in Detroit, Michigan to Ethel Lee Jones Holley and Major Q. Holley and to a family of eight children. Holley attended Higginbotham Elementary School and then transferred to Post Intermediate Academy in 1945 before graduating from Cass Technical High School in 1951. Holley enrolled in Michigan State University and earned his B.A. degree in history in 1996.

In 1953, at the age of twenty, Holley was drafted into the United States Army. He attended the Army Radar School in Texas until 1954 when he was sent to England where he served his first tour of duty. In 1955, Holley returned to the United States and worked briefly for the Detroit Department of Street Railways. He joined the Michigan National Guard in October 1956 and served almost four decades as a military technician. Holley retired in 1991 with the rank of Chief Warrant Officer 4. Holley became interested in genealogy and started pursuing his own family history. In 2000, administrators at the Lansing Area African American Genealogy Society (LAAAGS) asked Holley to help build their organization into one of national prominence. He urged promotion of the preservation of African American family history and created a forum for sharing data. In addition, Holley hosted seminar discussions such as, "Getting Beyond Myself: An Introduction to African American Genealogy." He was elected president of the LAAAGS in 2006.

Holley is a member of the Religious Conference Management Association, United Conferences for Men and Greater Lansing Youth for Christ organizations. Holley lives in Lansing, Michigan and is married to Verna Holley. They have three adult children: Mark, Timothy and Millicent.

Melvin Julius Holley was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 29, 2008 and October 23, 2012.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Melvin J. Holley was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 29, 2008 and October 23, 2012, in Detroit, Michigan and Lansing, Michigan, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. City transit worker and genealogist Melvin J. Holley (1933 - ) served as president of the Lansing Area African American Genealogical Society.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Holley, Melvin J., 1933-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Holley, Melvin J., 1933- --Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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Lansing (Mich.)

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## Occupations:

Genealogist

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Melvin J. Holley, February 29, 2008 and October 23, 2012. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin J. Holley, Section A2008\_038\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Melvin J. Holley was born on January 27, 1933 in Detroit, Michigan to Ethel Jones Holley and Major Holley, Sr. His paternal ancestors were enslaved on the plantation of John Wesley Purdie in North Carolina, and later settled in Selma, Alabama, where Holley's father was raised. Holley's maternal grandmother, Mary Collins Jones, was born in Alabama to sharecroppers Julia Collins and

Pharris Collins. His maternal grandfather, Alfred Jones, was the son of Wiley Jones, a landowner who was often mistaken as white. Jones bequeathed his land to Holley's maternal grandfather, and Holley's mother was raised on the property. She attended a country school outside of Greensboro, Alabama, and obtained a high school education. Holley's parents married in 1919 and moved to Detroit, where Holley's father had registered for the draft. Holley recalls visiting Alabama as a young boy to attend his maternal great-grandmother's funeral, which was his first experience in the Jim Crow South.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin J. Holley, Section A2008\_038\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Melvin J. Holley's father, Major Holley, Sr., was raised in Selma, Alabama, where he attended Selma University. He moved to Detroit, Michigan in 1915 and was hired as a molder for hood ornaments. Holley's parents met in Birmingham, Alabama shortly afterwards, and settled in Detroit in 1919. Holley and his eight siblings were raised near Eight Mile Road, which separated the white suburbs from the city's African American neighborhood. Uncle Tom's Plantation, a nearby nightclub, hosted acts like Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughn, and Count Basie, and Holley was often hired to clean up the following morning. Holley and his family were members of Berean Tabernacle church, which his father had helped build. The church urged its members to follow strict moral codes that excluded dancing and drinking. Nonetheless, Holley and his siblings were permitted to listen to radio programs, including the Joe Louis fights. Holley occasionally patronized the Telenews Theatre and the J.H. Hudson Department Store in downtown Detroit.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin J. Holley, Section A2008\_038\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Melvin J. Holley was on safety patrol at Higginbotham Elementary School in Detroit, Michigan before graduating to Loren Post Intermediate School. He took college preparatory classes per his mother's request until enrolling at Cass Technical High School, where he studied auto mechanics. Upon graduating in 1951, Holley was unfairly denied employment with the U.S. Navy. He instead worked at the Detroit Ordinance District for two years until he was drafted into the Korean War. Although the armed forces were desegregated, Holley experienced prejudice from his white peers. He was stationed briefly at Fort Bliss in Texas, and then served overseas in England for six months before completing his active duty and returning to Detroit. In 1956, he joined the Michigan Army National Guard as a radar mechanic. Although he was not deployed during the 1967 riots in Detroit, his National Guard uniform made him a potential target for snipers. In 1969, Holley was transferred to the National Guard station in Lansing, Michigan.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin J. Holley, Section A2008\_038\_002\_004, TRT: 4:31:12 ?

Melvin J. Holley's paternal grandmother, Sophia Purdie, warned his father, Major Holley, Sr., not to register for the World War I draft in Alabama. She urged him to move to Detroit, Michigan instead to avoid discrimination. As a young boy, Holley heard this story from his grandmother, along with other oral histories about her life and family. He noticed a lack of information about African Americans in his formal education, and sought to learn from older family members. At this point in the interview, Holley talks about the value and validity of oral histories. As a young man, Holley studied history under Richard W. Thomas at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. At the time, Thomas was writing a book about his family history in the larger context of Detroit history. This inspired Holley to trace his own genealogy after his graduation in 1976, and he found that many of his paternal relatives still resided in Alabama.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin J. Holley, Section A2008\_038\_002\_005, TRT: 5:29:43 ?

Melvin J. Holley was recruited by Wilbur Howard to help establish the Lansing Area African American Genealogical Society (LAAAGS) in 2000. Founding members included Brenda Henderson, Carrie Baptiste Jackson, Jan Smith Lewis and Mary Agnes Lipscomb, who were all researching their family histories privately. LAAAGS aimed to help African American genealogists collaborate and access resources. Meetings often featured presentations on research and seminars, such as the Abrams Foundation Family History Seminar, as well as appearances by professional genealogist Anthony “Tony” Preston Burroughs. When the Library of Michigan threatened to sell many of its historical resources, LAAAGS members petitioned to keep such materials available. Through the group, Holley researched Andrew Dungey, an early African American citizen of Lansing who advanced quickly from a carpenter to a realtor. While conducting his own family research, Holley found valuable primary sources in Alabama, and accessed records on the internet.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin J. Holley, Section A2008\_038\_002\_006, TRT: 6:28:46 ?

Melvin J. Holley’s research into the Dungey family led him to Andrew Dungey’s connection to the Prince Hall Masons, but also left some questions unanswered. In his research into Lansing, Michigan’s African American community, Holley learned about six local families and their ties to the George R. Collins Memorial A.M.E. Church. He also uncovered further information about the first woman president of the local NAACP. She was a custodian at a white United Methodist church, which suggests a level of white sympathy to the African American community at the time. His own family research was aided by oral histories from relatives, who gave him information he would not have found in traditional history sources. At the time of the interview, the Lansing Area African American Genealogical Society was preparing to celebrate its tenth anniversary, and aimed to add headstones to the graves of several Civil War veterans. Holley describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin J. Holley, Section A2008\_038\_002\_007, TRT: 7:28:56 ?

Melvin J. Holley was stationed at Fort Bliss in Texas at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. He noticed the rapid deployment of planes, but did not understand the significance of the moment until later. Holley and his wife, Verna Holley, raised three children together in Detroit, Michigan. Their oldest son, Mark Holley, earned a bachelor of arts degree; their younger son, Timothy Holley, became an associate music professor at North Carolina Central University in Durham, North Carolina; and their daughter, Millicent Holley, worked as a pathologist assistant at the University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Holley talks about his siblings, including his two older brothers who passed away prior to the interview. He reflects upon his life, legacy and how he would like to be remembered. Holley concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.